

OCT. 23, 1976

ELECTION '76: THE FINAL DEBATE

ANNCR: CHARLES MEDD HAS THESE OBSERVATIONS OF THE LAST OF THREE DEBATES BETWEEN PRESIDENT FORD AND DEMOCRAT JIMMY CARTER.

VOICE: THESE DEBATES HAVE BEEN WIDELY CRITICIZED FOR THEIR EMPHASIS ON PERSONALITY RATHER THAN ISSUES, BUT NO ONE QUESTIONS THEIR POLITICAL IMPACT. AFTER THE FIRST DEBATE -- GENERALLY REGARDED AS A FORD VICTORY -- THE PRESIDENT ALL BUT ELIMINATED HIS OPPONENT'S LEAD IN THE PUBLIC OPINION POLLS. AFTER THEIR SECOND MEETING -- VIEWED IN MOST QUARTERS AS A CARTER VICTORY -- THOSE SAME POLLS SHOWED THE DEMOCRAT ONCE AGAIN MOVING AHEAD. SO, NO WONDER THE ADVANCE BUILD-UP OF THIS THIRD AND FINAL DEBATE WHICH MOST OF THE PRESS COMPARED TO A CHAMPIONSHIP ATHLETIC EVENT. FOR WHAT WAS BILLED AS A CRITICAL CONTEST, THE TWO CANDIDATES BEGAN IN A SURPRISINGLY SUBDUED FASHION, AS THOUGH THEY WERE MORE CONCERNED ABOUT MAKING ERRORS THAN SCORING DEBATING POINTS. BOTH ADMITTED TO CAMPAIGN MISTAKES, AND BOTH PROMISED TO KEEP THE REMAINING TEN DAYS OF THE CAMPAIGN AT A RESPONSIBLE LEVEL.

BUT AS THE DEBATE ROLLED ON, THE TEMPO QUICKENED, AND THE ANSWERS TURNED SHARP. ALL BUT A FEW OF THE QUESTIONS CENTERED ON DOMESTIC MATTERS, THE AREAS WHERE THE CANDIDATES DIFFER THE MOST. ONCE MORE, MISTER FORD, AS THE INCUMBENT, DEFENDED HIS OWN RECORD, SAYING THE ECONOMY IS IMPROVING AND THAT FAITH AND CONFIDENCE IN THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT HAVE BEEN RESTORED. AND MISTER CARTER, AS THE CHALLENGER, CITED URBAN ENVIRONMENTAL AND UNEMPLOYMENT PROBLEMS AS EVIDENCE OF PRESIDENTIAL FAILURES. THERE WERE NO NEW DISCLOSURES, NOT SURPRISINGLY SINCE BOTH MEN HAVE BEEN CAMPAIGNING, FIRST FOR THEIR PARTY NOMINATIONS AND NOW FOR THE PRESIDENCY, FOR MORE THAN A YEAR.

JUST HOW DECISIVE THIS LAST DEBATE WAS WILL DEPEND ON THE REACTION OF THAT LARGE NUMBER OF VOTERS WHO AT THIS LATE STAGE OF THE CAMPAIGN REMAIN UNDECIDED. AND PART OF THAT REACTION WILL DEPEND ON THE OVERALL JUDGMENT OF THE PRESS AND WHAT THE NEXT ROUND OF PUBLIC OPINION SURVEYS HAVE TO SAY. WHAT THEY SAID BEFORE THIS FINAL TELEVISED MEETING WAS THAT JIMMY CARTER IS AHEAD BY ABOUT SIX PERCENTAGE POINTS, AND ONE SURVEY -- TAKEN IMMEDIATELY AFTER DEBATE NUMBER THREE -- SHOWED A MORE FAVORABLE RESPONSE FOR THE DEMOCRAT.

HOW WELL THE DEBATES SUCCEEDED IN DEFINING NATIONAL ISSUES WILL BE ARGUED FOR SOME TIME. WHATEVER THEIR SHORTCOMINGS, THESE TELEVISED ENCOUNTERS -- LASTING A TOTAL OF FOUR AND ONE HALF HOURS -- GAVE EVERY AMERICAN VOTER AN INTIMATE LOOK AT TWO VASTLY DIFFERENT MEN SEEKING THE PRESIDENCY. IT WAS MISTER FORD WHO CALLED FOR THIS YEAR'S DEBATES -- THE FIRST PRESIDENT TO DO SO -- AND JUST WHICH CANDIDATE WAS HELPED THE MOST, IF AT ALL, MAY NOT BE KNOWN UNTIL ELECTION DAY.